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Organizations call on Nassau County to take urgent action to protect Black communities amid pandemic

Advocates highlight data showing racial disparities in coronavirus impact

NASSAU COUNTY, NY — Today, a group of local organizations — including ERASE Racism, Birth Justice Warriors, the Long Island Black Alliance, the Long Island Progressive Coalition and the National Institute of Reproductive Health — collectively urged Nassau County to take swift action to protect its communities of color as alarming new statistics show the disproportionate impact the coronavirus pandemic is having on Long Island’s Black population.

These organizations called on Nassau County to immediately direct adequate resources to hot-spot areas; to actively promote testing in drive-through/walk-up locations in Elmont, in addition to Hempstead and Freeport; to publish data on COVID-19 deaths by race/ethnicity on the Nassau County Department of Health website; to report the number of tests administered at each testing site; to release a strategy for contact tracing on those who have tested positive; and to formulate and release a plan to conduct outreach in the most impacted communities. The local leaders and organizers also implored Nassau County Executive Laura Curran and other county officials to regularly address and acknowledge issues impacting communities of color throughout this pandemic.

The call to action followed a [panel](#) discussion about Long Island's pre-existing racial disparities and how they explain the pandemic's disproportionate impact on Black communities. The panelists highlighted [data](#) (*see background document*) that show Nassau County has the highest age-adjusted rate of deaths due to COVID-19 among Black residents, higher than in New York City. The county also has 2.5 times more Black than white deaths, a larger ratio than in New York City.

Quotes from advocates, organizers and organizations:

“Nassau County has a long history of ignoring the health outcomes of its Black residents, but the shocking rate of deaths due to COVID-19 for Black people in Nassau County requires immediate, science-informed action and leadership. Nassau County has known for weeks where the hotspots are for COVID-19 infection and their delay in making local testing available may have cost lives. This is public health negligence.” - **Dr. Martine Hackett, Director of Public Health Programs at Hofstra University and co-founder of Birth Justice Warriors**

“Blacks are bearing a disproportionate burden of COVID-19 in Nassau County, and the County must address two related challenges: first, it must increase healthcare access and COVID-19 testing in black communities; second, it must combat the structural racism that fuels the disparities. The historic and ongoing racial discrimination and segregation in housing in Nassau County is well-documented and contributes significantly to Long Island's standing as one of the most racially segregated metropolitan regions in America. Government policies and actions perpetuate structural racism, and it will take government actions to address the disparities evident from COVID-19.” - **Elaine Gross, President of ERASE Racism**

"Across Long Island Black residents are making up disproportionate numbers of COVID-19 related illnesses and deaths compared to their population share. Suffolk County has opened testing sites in certain hotspots to address this immediate issue and while much more will need to be done to ensure the health of these populations into the future, it is currently more than what we're seeing in Nassau County. The County leadership needs to take immediate action to protect the public health in its vulnerable communities, whose residents are more likely to be working essential, frontline jobs, risking their safety and that of their families to serve the rest of us.” - **Long Island Black Alliance**

“One's quality of life should not be determined by your zip code, but in Nassau County it is. From infant mortality to pandemic fatality rates, the common thread is Long Island's structural inequities that affect the health outcomes of Black Long Islanders. We must push back on the narrative of race as a comorbidity for COVID-19. Race is not the underlying factor — racism is. This pandemic has only further exposed the entrenched implicit bias and mistreatment Black communities face when trying to access healthcare and testing in Nassau County. After months of the county's complacency to act, there needs to be accountability and communication with Black advocates, community members, essential workers, and families moving forward.” - **Sarika Kumar, Long Island Regional Organizer, National Institute for Reproductive Health**

“The fact of the matter is, by deliberate design Long Island is one of the nation’s most racially and socio-economically segregated regions. This type of systemic oppression has contributed to a variety of *pre-pandemic* disparities, including in public health and access to care - the cost of which has been Black lives. Throughout the nation and Long Island, Black people are contracting and dying of COVID-19 at astronomical rates. It is imperative that well-informed action takes place immediately to ensure the safety of our communities at large. There is an African-American proverb: ‘When white folks catch a cold, Black folks get pneumonia.’ The message here is: when America gets COVID-19, Black folks die.” - **Nia Adams, Community Organizer, Long Island Progressive Coalition**

BLACK COVID AND THE FAILURES OF NASSAU COUNTY

By Martine Hackett, Ph.D., MPH

Director of Public Health Programs at Hofstra University and co-founder of Birth Justice Warriors

Nassau County has a long history of ignoring the health concerns of its Black residents. Structural racism created racially segregated housing, school districts, and environments. These social determinants of health are the fundamental cause of health disparities—from infant mortality to asthma to heart disease.

Across the United States, locations that have published data on COVID-19 fatalities by race/ethnicity have also found a disproportionate amount of deaths to Blacks. President Trump on April 7 acknowledged African Americans are disproportionately getting sick and dying of COVID-19.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as of April 17 started to publish COVID-19 deaths by race/ethnicity in response to pressure from members of Congress and leading medical associations.

According to County Executive Laura Curran, in Nassau County there are more patients and fatalities than any other municipality in the entire nation outside of New York City.

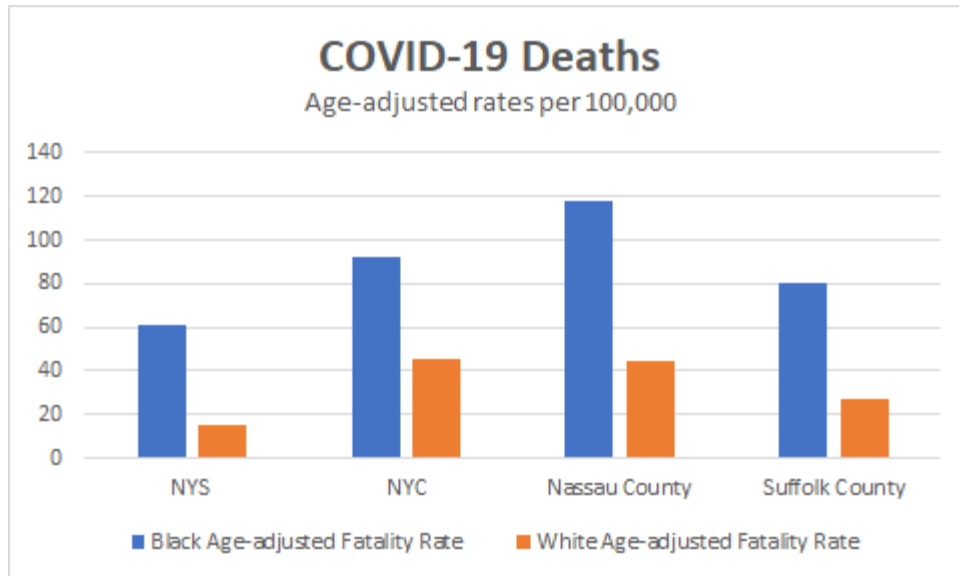
Specifically, the highest number of positive COVID 19 cases in Nassau County are in communities of color: Hempstead, Freeport, Elmont. Hempstead has had significantly more cases for three weeks; hundreds of more cases than other communities.

Nassau County also has the highest age-adjusted rate of deaths due to COVID-19 among Black residents, higher than in New York City, and has 2.5 times more Black than white deaths, a bigger ratio than in New York City.

Location	Black Age-adjusted Fatality Rate	White Age-adjusted Fatality Rate
NYS (excluding NYC)	61.0 per 100,000	15.0 per 100,000
NYC	92.3 per 100,000	45.2 per 100,000
Nassau County	117.6 per 100,000	44.8 per 100,000
Suffolk County	80.0 per 100,000	26.8 per 100,000

Sources: [NYS Department of Health COVID 19 Tracker](#) (as of 4/21/20)

[New York City Department of Health COVID-19 data](#) (as of 4/17/20)



With the dramatic rates of death to Blacks in Nassau County, and the recognition that Hempstead and other communities of color have significantly higher positive cases than other communities, what is Nassau County doing? Too little, too late.

Timeline:

March 24: Nassau County started to map and publish cases by community daily on the Department of Health website

April 6: Press conference by Mayor Don Ryan emphasizing stronger enforcement of social distancing in Hempstead. Local police were patrolling the bus station and LIRR station, and discussion of fines of \$1000, saying “more aggressive enforcement” is needed. (Source: Newsday, [Village Hit Hard by Virus Ramps Up Social Distancing Enforcement](#))

April 8: [Assemblywoman Michaelle Solages \(Elmont\) calls for New York State to provide rapid testing sites in Nassau communities of color.](#)

April 9: Suffolk County opens hot spot testing sites at Huntington High School, in Brentwood and Riverhead

April 14: [Newsday reports in a story](#) about disproportionate amount of deaths to blacks due to COVID-19. “David Nemiroff, president and chief executive of the nonprofit Long Island FQHC Inc., which has seven health centers in Nassau County, said county officials were "helping to facilitate" the acquisition of more coronavirus test kits to test the health centers' patients, more than 70% of whom are black and Latino. He said 65% of the centers' patients have tested positive for the virus.

"We're hoping for 100 kits at five of our largest sites," Nemiroff said, to "ramp up our capacity to test more.

April 17: Nassau County Office of Minority Affairs hosted a [Facebook Live meeting on Friday at 8:57pm](#) with Nassau County's Executive Director of Minority Affairs, Executive Director of Hispanic Affairs, and Director of Health Equity.

In the presentation they stated that all of the Long Island Federally Qualified Health Centers are available for testing for COVID-19. The flyer on the Facebook page stated:

“In efforts in making sure our hardest-hit communities are getting the care they need, Nassau County has partnered up with FQHCs to increase access to healthcare (including COVID-19 testing) regardless of ability to pay or immigration status. Please call to make an appointment (516) 296-3742.”

During the presentation the Director of Health Equity stated that: “You can get the test whether you are insured or uninsured”.

However, the reality is not so simple. Based on a phone call at 10am on 4/20/20 to the Hempstead Family Health Center:

- There is no testing for the general public, cannot make an appointment to be tested for COVID 19 alone
- Must be a current patient of FQHC to be seen by one of their primary care physicians
- Tests are only available after an appointment and evaluation and recommendation by primary care physician (PCP)
- New patients must change from their current PCP to one at Federally Qualified Health Center through your insurance company
- If no insurance, you need to bring proof of income/notarized letter that you lost your job
- Then can make an appointment as a new patient
- New patient appointment availability not until May

4/20/20--No mention of COVID testing availability on the Long Island FQHC website, the Nassau County Department of Health website, or the County Executive's website.

4/21/20—Nassau County and the Long Island FQHCs send out attachments via email to “community partners” stating that COVID-19 testing is available by appointment only, after a phone screening, to those who have several symptoms at outdoor facilities in Hempstead and Freeport. Test results are available between 4 days-1 week.

Significance of these actions and risks to population health

The [American Medical Association](#) has pointed out the need for testing within impacted communities:

“And while testing prioritization of those who are critically ill and hospitalized is the necessary and appropriate protocol, we are further missing the opportunity to

test those who may be exposed to coronavirus. This only serves to more deeply challenge the accurate and consistent capture and public release of race and ethnicity data.

And this is further fueled by the concern that those minoritized and most marginalized, such as communities of color, may not have access to testing equal to others and may harbor distrust for the health care system, preventing them from seeking care. This is an absolute recipe for undercounting and misrepresentation, keeping invisible social and structural harms and actual disease burden.”

Not engaging communities of color in Nassau County further jeopardizes the potential for successful phased reopening, according to from [Johns Hopkins University Center for Health Security](#):

“The most critical component in communication around reopening is to ensure community engagement in both mitigation measures taken to prevent the spread of disease and plans for reopening. This requires substantial effort to coordinate with community and business stakeholders. Communication must address concerns from those stakeholders and should be conducted with an interest in 2-way communication and input from a wide range of voices. **Without community engagement as a goal of communication efforts, there is a risk of distrust, spread of misinformation, and lack of compliance.** Different states and local communities may weigh differently the competing considerations as to how they stage their reopening, based on local needs, resources, social issues, and risk factors. This underscores the importance of leaving these decisions to state and local officials, and for state and local officials to involve interdisciplinary stakeholder groups in reopening discussions.”

Action Points for Nassau County:

- Publish data on COVID-19 deaths by race/ethnicity on Nassau County Department of Health website
- Actively promote testing in drive through/walk up locations in Hempstead, Elmont and Freeport for residents. Results need to be provided as soon as possible to treat the severity of COVID-19 among black residents.
- Engage community based organizations and stakeholders from communities of color in Nassau County during the planning and communication of phased reopening. Legitimate community engagement is necessary for maximum compliance.
- Conduct contact tracing of those who have tested positive for COVID-19 in Hempstead, Elmont and other communities with high testing counts.
- Direct adequate resources to hot spot areas in Nassau County including coordination of food distribution, infant and child care needs, cleaning supplies and other necessary items to prevent the spread of the COVID 19 virus.